

## When Autobiography and Research Topics Collide: Two Risky School Dance Stories

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### Introduction

This article will document how I engaged a group of high school drama students, in a rural Alberta community of majority Aboriginal<sup>1</sup> population, in doing Popular Theatre as a form of participatory research (Kidd & Byram, 1978; Park, 1993). Popular Theatre is a process by which members of a community identify issues of concern, analyze conditions and causes, and search for solutions or alternative responses (Boal, 1974/79; Prentki & Selman, 2000). It draws on participants' experiences to collectively create theatre and discuss issues through theatrical means. Through the research, I hoped to better understand the experiences of youth that might deem them "at-risk,"<sup>2</sup> from their perspective, and explore the potential of Popular Theatre in doing so. My interest in "at-risk" was based in my prior work with so-called "at-risk" youth, and as this paper will reveal, my own risky experiences as a youth.

Our Popular Theatre work focused on issues that the students identified as relevant to their lives. The theme that emerged through drama activities and discussion was "Life in the Sticks." Through a collective process, we created a series of scenes depicting what the students' initially claimed as their issues as determined by their rural environment. The stories students told, the vignettes we created and the animation<sup>3</sup> process became a sort of "ethnodrama" or performance ethnography (Denzin, 1997; Fabian, 1990; Turner & Turner, 1982), revealing risk-taking behaviours, including substance abuse, risky sexual activity and rule breaking, as common to the experiences of these youth. Ultimately, however, the students rejected the notion of being "at-risk," claiming that their risky behaviours were a matter of personal choice and habit. They reclaimed their agency, but left me wondering what motivated their risky choices. My desire as researcher to better understand the motivation behind youths' risky choices, including my own risky behaviour as a youth, is the subject of this paper.

In the following pages, I present two autoethnographic stories (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Ellis & Bochner, 2000) that involve risky youth behaviour; two school dance stories, which reflect on my research with students. The first describes an incident that occurred at a school dance while I was in the community doing the research. The other story describes a school dance experience from my youth. The two stories juxtaposed show how my autobiographical experiences influence my response to the research.

For ethical, thematic, and practical/writerly reasons the stories are fictionalized accounts of what actually took place (Banks & Banks, 1998). I have changed names, dates and less significant details to disguise the events for ethical reasons and to make the stories reader friendly. This also provides me some distance from the actual events in order to reflect on them from a socio-cultural rather than a personal perspective. The stories are intended not as acts of indulgent self-discovery, but as cultural self-readings (Ang, 1994) as I compare and contrast my experiences as a youth with those of others.

In my interpretation of the stories, I use post-modern and psychoanalytic lenses to examine my experiential/embodied/unconscious process of arriving at understanding. Also, as creative works, I want the stories to speak for themselves to some extent (Saldaña, 2003). I hope that the reader will make meaning beyond my interpretation — that the stories will resonate with the reader's own experiences.

I use the term “collision” in my title to highlight the real danger inherent in the risky youth behaviour described in the stories.

### School Dance Stories

One evening, during my time in the community, on my way to help supervise a school dance, I had an experience that complicated my emerging thoughts about youths' risky behaviour based on our Popular Theatre work, and collided with memories of my own risky experiences as a youth. I wrote the following autoethnographic narrative in response to finding a student's stash under a bush next to the school on the night I was supervising the school dance. The story describes my conflicted response to the find.

#### *School Dance 1999*

One Friday evening during my stay in the community, I offered to help supervise the high school dance. Many of the students who were participating in my research would be there. I thought this would be a great chance to get to know them better. I walked along the dirt path between the trailer where I was staying and the school. It was about 7 o'clock and just getting dark. The evening was brisk. I remember putting a sweater on under my favourite faded jean jacket. At least it wasn't too muddy tonight.

As I approached the end of the fence that enclosed the school grounds, I could tell that the dance had already begun. Music and the noise of rowdy voices wafted

out from the gym. Several kids in pairs and small groups wandered in and out through the front doors. I walked past the scraggly bush that grew right up against the fence half way to the corner of building, the same bush that I had walked past every day on my way to and from school for the past weeks. I was only partly aware of a dark object tucked under the bush. I walked right by it at first, assuming it was something discarded. I don't know what made me stop and look again at that spot under the bush. There were many discarded objects around — maybe this one didn't seem quite discarded enough, or maybe it was that I'd walked past this bush so many times before and hadn't noticed a discarded black thing. For some reason I was suspicious. I hesitated. Whatever it was, did I really want to go groping around under a bush at this time of night, on my way to the dance?

I stepped a little closer and saw that it was a backpack. Now I was really suspicious and curious — memories of school dances from my high school days whispered warnings in my head. Did I really want to know? Did I really want to get involved in whatever that backpack was hiding there under the bush on the night of a school dance? I'm not sure if it was my sense of responsibility (a professional obligation) — my concern for the kids (worst case scenario — What if there was a gun in that bag?) — or just plain voyeuristic curiosity (remembering what I was like back then), that made me check out the bag. I grabbed it from its hiding spot under the bush. As I picked it up, I could hear the clinking of bottles inside. I tugged at the zipper and found a six-pack of raspberry/lemonade coolers and a colourful, skimpy tank top. It belonged to a female, I concluded. I wondered if it was anyone I knew — one of the girls from drama class perhaps. I tried to imagine what the owner had in mind. Was she going to sneak out here with her friends during the dance and pass around the bottles, all giggly at the sheer rebelliousness of the act? Maybe it was for a party after the dance, a little drinking, a boy . . .

Once I knew what was inside, I still wasn't sure what to do with the bag. I questioned my motives. I questioned my questioning of my motives. As an adult, teacher, and authority figure, shouldn't I automatically turn it in? Then why was I hesitating? Whose side was I on? Was this about taking sides? On the one hand, this was just like something I might have done as a high school student. It was a little harmless fun, wasn't it? How drunk could she get on six coolers anyway? I was tempted to return the bag to its spot under the bush and just forget I'd ever seen it. I would have a private, subversive chuckle knowing that someone at the dance was getting away with it. On the other hand, what if I didn't turn in the bag and something terrible happened. What if she got caught with the booze and expelled from school? What if she had an accident drinking and driving on the way home or got into a car with someone who was drinking — something she wouldn't have done if she were sober? What if she got hurt or killed? I would be forever guilty, an adult, a teacher, having had the opportunity to do something, to prevent tragedy, and done nothing.

While I was willing to allow the girl her dissident behaviour, I decided, I would not be able to live with the guilt should anything bad come of it. I left the backpack

there, entered the school building and searched for the vice-principal, who I knew was on duty. I told him that I'd found a backpack tucked under a bush outside the school. I told him what was inside. He was very, very interested as I knew he would be. We shared a conspiratorial sort of laugh. Did we get a kick out of outsmarting the culprit? Had we proven our authority/superiority once again by catching them up to their tricks? Or was it the sheer nerve of the kid to try such a stunt that amused us? We walked out through the front doors together, past hordes of students coming and going in the hallway from the coat rack to the pop machines and back to the gym where the dancing was underway. I took him to the spot and showed him the backpack under the bush. He took it inside. He was going to hold on to it, he said, to see if anyone would be foolish enough to claim it, which of course no one ever did. He named a couple of girls he thought might be capable of such a thing. One of them was a girl from my drama group.

I walked back into the school and into the gym. The music was loud, much too loud to carry on any kind of conversation and the lights were dim with spots of colour spinning around the room. There were students huddled in groups around the dance floor dancing or standing up against the wall. As I looked around, I caught occasional glimpses of familiar faces. I couldn't help feel sorry for whoever's bag it was that I had turned in. I felt a twinge of disloyalty to the students who had been so open in sharing stories of their escapades with me during our work together. Just a couple days before we had talked about informers or rats as they called them — how they were viewed with contempt by other students, even beaten up. We had talked about why students told on each other — sometimes for revenge, and how the administration used students by encouraging the behaviour. Now I was the rat. Our conversation had been about students informing on each other. I was a visiting teacher/researcher turning in a student. Was policing part of my job? It was certainly part of my supervisory duties at the dance. In any case, ultimately, I had done it to protect them, I told myself. Still, somehow I felt guilty. I felt implicated.

Several days later, I noticed the six pack of raspberry/lemonade coolers and the black backpack still sitting on the vice-principal's office shelf where he had put them that night. The owner had never claimed her possessions. On top of it all, I felt bad that she, whoever she was, had had to part with the backpack — a useful item, and the beautiful tank top too. I had done the right thing by turning in that backpack, hadn't I? But it didn't feel entirely right. I wonder if something can be right and not right at the same time.

Ironically, my good intentions of helping out with the dance to get to know students better plunged me into a dilemma. I got to know students better, but not in the way I had expected. Here was an example of exactly the kind of risky youth behaviour my research was interrogating. When my role as teacher/dance supervisor was suddenly brought into conflict with my identity as researcher/Popular Theatre facilitator, I was left grovelling in uncertainty. My responsibility in relation to this act of risky youth behaviour was not at all clear.

That evening as a dance supervisor, I was expected to patrol students' behaviour, to keep them in line, but as researcher, the very behaviour that deemed them out of line, was the terrain of my inquiry. My indecision surrounding the black object under the bush was unsettling — an "ordeal of undecidability," which Derrida (Caputo, 1997) suggests is a possibility sustained by impossibility. In this case, the impossibility of determining where my responsibility lay. I began by questioning my motivation for looking or not looking under the bush. I had a duty to fulfill, but how far was I willing to go to fulfil it. I questioned my motivation as researcher. Was my interest in the backpack out of voyeuristic curiosity about my students' risky behaviour? Or was it sincere concern for the well-being of my students? It was unsettling how, in the moment of decision-making, the research topic erupted the boundaries of the formal research setting, the classroom, and the formal research relationship and collided with my "real" life both past and present. This eruption of the Lacanian Real (Bowie, 1991) disrupted my search for identity, the right distance between teacher/student, researcher-facilitator/participant. Suddenly, my next move in the real world was caught up in the illicit behaviour of the student, and thoroughly entangled in my research topic. I felt exposed, implicated.

As my indecision suggests, the process of decision-making was not pre-determined. In the past, my teacher identity would likely not have thought twice about turning in that backpack. Now, though, I struggled with my obligations to the institution, my role as dance supervisor. Ultimately I did not take recourse in the Law. I did not turn in the backpack because the authority demanded it. Though this, no doubt, would be how my turning in the backpack would be perceived.

Caught in the process of weighing the consequences of my next move, my indecision was informed by the work that students and I were doing in the classroom. As part of our Popular Theatre process students had shared a story recounting an incident that had occurred the previous year when some students were caught drinking alcohol on a school bus trip. We acted out and explored the incident and the issues it raised. Inquiring how the administration found out about the drinking, students raised the possibility of peer informing. Despite acknowledging that rules were necessary, they said, "Rats suck." They felt students who informed on other students deserved being beaten up. In our work together students had confided in me regarding their risky behaviour, developing a relationship of mutual trust. Here I was cast as their supervisor/judge. I did not want to inform on them, to become the "rat" who turned in the backpack. My empathy with the students' attitudes helped me see it from their perspective. My research cast doubt on any course of action.

Lyng (1998), reflecting on his participation in the risk-taking activities that he was researching that left him critically injured, introduces the notion of a "hierarchy of consequences," that also applies in this case. From an ethical standpoint, when encountering behaviour that involves potential risk, the researcher needs to take the consequences of the action into consideration. At the top of Lyng's hierarchy are actions that unambiguously lead to the harming of others, at the bottom harmless

acts of disobedience. As he notes, however, the task of identifying the precise criteria on which to judge one's actions as harmful or harmless is ambiguous. Was drinking at a school dance just "harmless fun," or might something bad have come of it? Ironically, students' earlier self-identification as "bad-asses" and my own admission to having been a "bad-ass" in my youth, collided with my fear as teacher/supervisor that something bad might actually happen. How are we to judge the potential risk of any risky youth behaviour?

My concern for the student was also partly based on my own experiences as a youth. I knew that the six-pack of coolers could indeed lead to further illicit behaviour, even tragedy. The associations I made between drinking at a school dance and the dangers of boys, driving under the influence, and car crashes was grounded in my personal experience, the subject of my accompanying story. Nor is the danger of car accidents an idle concern as they are, nowadays, one of the major causes of injury and death amongst young people. The risk involved was real and for me, the risk implied by the backpack was not worth taking. But who was I to make the decision of whether to take the risk or not? Was I asserting my authority after all? I told myself I turned in the backpack based on my sense of responsibility to the students. My concern was for keeping them out of trouble and keeping them safe from harm. Was I being paternalistic?

My conflicting feelings of guilt, if I were not to turn in the backpack and something bad came of it, and disloyalty to students for "ratting" on them, depict my punishing super-ego (Evans, 1996) at work in my conflicting roles of authoritative adult/teacher/supervisor versus sympathetic Popular Theatre facilitator/researcher. When I turned in the bag to the vice-principal, our conspiratorial laughter revealed our shared *jouissance* (Evans, 1996) — the painful pleasure we experienced in finding the "find," of outsmarting the culprit, perhaps our repressed admiration for the sheer nerve of the student in trying to defy us. Even our sincere concern for students had its evil underside as we took joy in our demise of their enjoyment.

School Dance 1999 ends with the query: Can something be right and not right at the same time? This is precisely the quest for justice that can never be attained, as justice is always a matter of perspective. This was the place where justice and Law fell apart. My compulsion to do the right thing came up against my emerging realization that right and wrong can always only be partial. I was engaged in an endless search for the rule that would do justice to the case (Zylinska, 2001).

My next story resonates with the previous one — an echo from twenty years earlier. It is a story about an experience I had back in 1979 as a teenager on the way to a high school dance. This was one of the memories that hovered at the back of my mind as I decided what to do with the backpack I found on the night of the school dance in 1999. The two stories, juxtaposed, show how my personal history informed my research into risky youth experiences, and how these in turn inform my response to youth.

*School Dance 1979*

When I was in high school, in grade 11, back in 1979, I had a boyfriend named Paul. He was one year older than me, played hockey and drove a dark blue Ford Mustang. He was a great boyfriend. Not only did he have a car — which was a status symbol in itself, but it was a fabulous car. It was fast, powerful, and all the others guys at school wished it were theirs. This made Paul ever so popular. And I was always proud to sit in the car next to him.

One Friday night we had plans to go to the school dance. But before the dance, Paul and his friend Dave wanted to visit another friend in a neighbouring town. Each took his own car. I drove with Paul in the Mustang. Dave drove his girlfriend in his car. Paul took the old Highway Number 16 from Stevensville, picked me up in Roseland, and then on to Bartlett, to the friend's house. Old Highway Number 16 is a narrow, two-lane highway winding through scenic farmland. Just before the town of Bartlett, the road dips and winds through a valley where the escarpment meets the road. The road is particularly winding through the valley, cut into the side of the hill. At certain points, the drop beyond the guardrails is straight down. I'd taken that stretch of road a thousand times before, and the trip to Bartlett that evening was as uneventful as ever. The ride back to the dance however would prove more treacherous.

We spent an hour or so at the friend's house. Just enough time for a few beers, a few joints, and a few laughs. Then we were headed back to the dance. I must have got plenty intoxicated in that short time. My memory of being there, of the people we met, is fuzzy. I must not have been thinking clearly to get into the car with Paul in his state. He must have been too drunk to realize he couldn't drive.

Dave and his girlfriend drove on ahead and we followed in the Mustang. Driving through the valley, it was already dark. The road was deserted. The headlights reflected off the black tarmac, the solid yellow line down its centre. It was drizzling I think. The road was winding and blurry. I was talking to Paul, but what was I saying? We were moving slowly, or was I just experiencing everything in slow motion? The next thing I knew, as we were climbing the hill to leave the valley, the car swerved across into the oncoming lane — thank goodness there was no traffic, and off the road. On that side of the road, the escarpment went straight up. We must have driven partly up the incline, because then I felt gravity pulling us back down. Paul's side of the car left the ground and began to roll over ever so gently. Inside, in slow motion, I saw the windshield turn in front of me, and I turned with it. I felt the impact as the car rolled onto its side. I reached my arms up to brace myself against the roof as it flipped over, and landed upside-down in the middle of the road. I heard the crunch of metal as the car came to rest on its roof. I wasn't wearing my seat belt. I pushed open my door easily, or was it already open, and crawled out. Within seconds that seemed like an eternity, I was standing on the road looking back at the car, wheels in the air still spinning. I was shaken, shaking, but not a scratch. Paul was still inside. I called to him to get out. Got a muffled reply. I went around to his side of the car. He was okay, but stuck behind the steering



wheel, mad as hell that he'd wrecked his car. He managed to squeeze out, also uninjured, except for a bruise on his leg.

Then other cars started appearing out of nowhere — headlights out of the dark. Cars stopped behind us. Drivers asking if we were okay. They told us we were lucky the car hadn't rolled again, right down the embankment — into the valley. I looked over the edge and felt queasy. Then Dave and his girlfriend were there. And now it was raining. When they noticed we weren't following anymore, Dave said, they'd turned around to look for us. They feared the worst. Dave whispered something to Paul. Then we could hear the sirens approaching in the distance. Fire engines, ambulances, and cop cars converging from both directions with lights flashing. The valley was notorious for accidents, but we didn't need them. All we needed was a tow truck for the car.

Before the cops arrived, Dave and his girlfriend whisked me away with them. They took me by the arms and led to me their car. They said it was no use me being caught on the scene, Paul would deal with the cops. I felt bad for leaving him, but went along to the dance.

Then I was there, at the dance, still shaken up, telling my story to friends and laughing. Nothing like a little danger to liven up the evening. In a half an hour or so, the vice-principal approached me. Then I was scared. He said the police wanted to talk to me, and led me to his office. I worried that the cops would be able to tell I was high, but they didn't say a thing about that. Paul told them that I'd been in the car. I guess there were witnesses that had seen me too — he couldn't deny it. No one knew what had happened to me. The cops looked everywhere. They even started searching for me in the valley. They even called home and now my parents were involved and all upset. The cops told me to call them so I did. I was hoping it wouldn't come to that. The less my parents knew about what I was up to the better. I got on the phone. They were angry, but mostly scared. I managed to calm them down. I wasn't hurt. I was at the dance with my friends. Nothing to worry about.

The cops left me at the dance and that was that. I got off easy I guess. Paul was charged with drinking and driving — not too big an offence in those days. He spent the night in the drunk tank. The worst of it all was that his car was totalled. The roof crumpled in — probably not worth fixing. It sat for a long time like that in Paul's driveway at home. So much for the fabulous car. We were very lucky to have walked away from the accident. Things could have been much worse. If we'd been going any faster, or if Paul had turned the wheel towards the valley side rather than the escarpment side of the road, the outcome may have been disastrous. As it turned out, though I didn't get to go to the school dance with Paul, I did make it to the dance, no worse for the wear.

The two school dance stories read together draw attention to the conflicted subjectivity that I brought to my role as a teacher and researcher exploring the risky experiences of youth, having engaged in risky behaviour myself as a youth. In fact,



I came to see this investigation of “at-risk” or risky youth behaviour as a working through of some of the ambivalences still surrounding my experiences as a youth — the research being as much about me as about the youth with whom I worked. The school dance memory that informed my decision about the backpack exemplifies Freud’s notion of *Nachträglichkeit* or “differed action” (Strachey, 1974) — how the affective associations from my past influenced my actions later in life.

The experience I describe in “*School Dance 1979*” is one among many that are the basis for my identification with “at-risk” youth. Like my research participants, my enjoyment in identifying as “bad-ass” was evident in the status I enjoyed in association with my boyfriend’s fast car, the fun in drinking and drug use, the pleasure I got from telling my elicited story to my friends. The use of the term “cop” as opposed to “police officer,” further suggested my position as “bad ass” — outside the law. Yet, it is a painful pleasure offset by the real dangers involved in the incident.

Seen from a distance, the drinking and driving incident and rollover in my youth, brings into perspective the real risk involved in some of my behaviour as a youth and the risky behaviour of youth today. While I understand the desire to want to drink at a school dance, I am also wary of the inherent dangers. In my story, the car literally transformed from being a fantasy object (*objet a*) providing status and enjoyment, into a death trap. The horror at how unexpectedly, how easily this transformation occurred makes the experience uncanny. My speculations regarding the young female student’s intentions in 1999, my worst fears for her were based on my having been there. My perspective looking back at my behaviour as a young woman was transferred to my response to finding the backpack. The backpack took on the psychological weight of the abject car and screamed of danger.

The car accident in 1979, though minor, had an impact. To this day, the thought of driving off the embankment haunts me. And though the consequences of our risky act were negligible for me, I cannot help but worry now, as I did in 1999, over the potential harm in seemingly harmless acts of fun and question whether the risk is worth taking.

In my moment of indecision my sense of responsibility and horror collided with the empathy I felt for the students’ risk-taking behaviour. I understood very well the desire to risk drinking alcohol at the school dance, but feared the potential dangers. The painful pleasure inherent in my decision making process revolved around “the booze” as the object of desire for my students as for myself in my youth. At the same time, it harboured a moment of terror. Caught between the prevention of harm — my students’ safety, and the *jouissance* of their/our risky behaviour, I chose to exercise caution. I turned in the backpack at the expense of their enjoyment. Now, I justify my decision by telling myself that as no one was caught for the deed, no one was punished, the potential for harm was minimized all around. However, in this dangerous, direct encounter with the alterity of the other (Zylinska, 2001), I had to risk becoming the despised informer.

In retrospect, other alternatives to turning in the backpack come to mind. What

if I had kept the bag, taken it home? What if I had enjoyed the coolers myself? How would I be implicated then? Or had I been willing to take the risk, I might have taken the backpack to class to explore the implications of the find with students in relation to risky behaviour, the authority of the school, and my conflicted role. Was this an opportunity for dialogue that I missed? No doubt this new memory will be added to my repertoire and carried into future queries.

### Conclusion

The collision of my identity as teacher/researcher with the topic of my research, brought on by the school dance incidents I describe, brings into focus how my subjectivity was implicated in the research. In search for an ethical response to being caught up in this way, I realize the needed to pay attention to my own history, my risky experiences as a youth, to let them also inform my thinking about youth behaviour. In this way, I make use of my risky youth experiences as a basis for empathetic understanding of and critical reflection on youth issues.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup>In planning my research I indicated an interest, based on my personal and professional experience, in working with so-called “at-risk” youth. I did not specifically seek to work with Aboriginal students. Tragically, as I was to learn, whether in the inner-city, the youth justice system or in a rural community, in Alberta, “at-risk” is highly correlated to being Aboriginal (see also Alberta Learning, 2001; Makokis, 2000). My work attempts to problematize the label in relation to all youth.

<sup>2</sup>The label “at-risk,” is used in the field of education to talk about students “at-risk” of failing or dropping out of school. In mainstream literature in education, health care and criminal justice, the label depicts youth as deficient or deviant. This research re-frames the label “at-risk” to include the perspectives of youth. It highlights the risky, risk-taking behaviour that youth engage in by choice, the enjoyment they gain from such experiences and its rebellious or resistant quality. In this way, the research advocates on behalf of youth, to dispel the negative image the label “at-risk” portrays.

<sup>3</sup>Animation is a term I borrow from Boal (1979/74) to refer to the process of employing various techniques (Image theatre and Forum theatre) to explore issues raised by a scene through theatrical means.

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